

**EXPECTATIONS AND BRAND EXPERIENCE:
MILLENNIALS - THE GENERATION THAT CAN SHAPE THE
FUTURE SERVICE QUALITY OF COMPANIES IN A DEVELOPING
ECONOMY**

Gordana SERAFIMOVIKJ

PhD student, Faculty of Economics,
Goce Delchev University - Stip
e-mail: gordana.serafimovic@gmail.com

Todor BADAROVSKI

PhD student, Faculty of Economics,
Goce Delchev University - Stip
e-mail: todorbadarovski@hotmail.com

Tamara JOVANOVIĆ

PhD, assistant professor, Faculty of Economics,
Goce Delchev University - Stip
e-mail: tamara.jovanov@ugd.edu.mk

Elenica SOFIJANOVA

PhD, professor, Faculty of Economics,
Goce Delchev University - Stip
e-mail: elenica.sofijanova@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to obtain a better understanding of the Millennials' expectations and to explore the relationship between their satisfaction and its influence on the brand. The model of SERVQUAL is used in this paper to measure service quality among consumers in order to understand their needs and behaviors within more than one specific generational group. The survey examines customers' expectations of the service quality and compares the findings with the perceptions of the service provided by a particular entrepreneurial automobile brand in Macedonia. The primary focus of the paper is to describe how Millennials, with their specific characteristics might shape the future service quality of the entrepreneurial businesses in a

developing economy. The study indicated that most of the customers (concerning the generations) are highly satisfied and loyal to the company. The results will be definitely beneficial to the automobile company, but in order to stay competitive on the market or to be ahead of their competitors they have to be very careful how to handle the Millennials. Today's customers, especially the Millennials expect something more. They want to be connected to the brand, they expect implacable service quality, and they have the internet and social media platforms at their disposal. This means that in order to retain a Millennial, companies have to take into consideration that this generation has a different way of thinking and they are ready to change the game in how companies do business.

Keywords: *SERVQUAL, customer satisfaction, generation Millennial, customer expectations, service quality*

1. Introduction

One of the most important activities for the companies now and in future is creation of base of loyal customers. Loyal customers can increase a company's income (Reichheld, 1993); they are more likely to purchase additional products and services (Reichheld, 1996) and they often generate new businesses for the company through word-of-mouth recommendations (Reichheld, 1996). Loyalty is more prevalent among consumers of services than among consumers of goods (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Traditionally, car maintenance was the main and only responsibility of the automobile service centers. Even though, the automobile industry played an important role in many national economies, the marketing experts in 1970ties considered the customers as rational decision makers, concerned only about the product's functional features (Qader&Omar, 2013). Customer satisfaction is the key to number of customers connected to a specific brand due to their positive experience with the brand itself or the automobile service center. Kotler and Keller (2009) defined customer satisfaction as the level of persons' felt state resulting from comparing a products' perceived performance or outcome in violation to his/her own expectations. Nowadays, companies, both

in developed and developing countries have to be aware of the fact that brand experience has a strategic role in the contemporary brand management.

The rapid development and competition of service quality, in both developed and developing countries has made the process of measurement and evaluation of service quality very important for companies (Brown&Bitber, 2007). Knowing more about customers' expectations and perceptions means finding better ways of meeting those expectations by providing positive brand experience. Brand experience is defined as sensations, feelings, cognition, and behavioral responses evoked by brand related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environment (Evans, 2011). Development of richer customer relationships could be a competitive advantage for practitioners as consumers seek emotional attachment with the car brand (Nadzri, Musa, Muda&Hassan,).

All customers should not be treated in the same way. Each one of them belongs to a different market segment, different generation. Not every generation is alike. They have unique needs, lifestyles, hobbies and interests. The focus of this paper is on the so called generation "Millennial" and "generation X", born between 1977 and 1994, and is in the 23-40 age range as of 2017. They were born into a technological, electronic and wireless society with global boundaries becoming more transparent. They are accustomed to a diverse universe where anything seems possible. (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh&Best, 2010). In Macedonia, a developing country, according to this research, Millennials are the second-largest car-buying population. They are also very informed and well aware of the latest products in the market. They have become a difficult generation for the retailers. They are online customers, masters of social media and demand a shopping experience tailored to their needs. They seek personalized products as a price that companies need to pay for their loyalty. The goal of the companies should be to create positive brand experience, because it is unbelievable how Millennial have changed in comparison to previous generations, and how much they are able to shape the automobile industry in a short period of time. Companies should bear in mind that research confirms service quality to be more and more important to automobile companies as customer satisfaction and loyalty lead to repeated purchases and higher market share (Al-Shammari&Kanina, 2014).

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

In the literature, there has been extensive progress as to how service quality perceptions should be measured but little advance as to what should be measured (Brady and Cronin, 2001). There is a choice of two

conceptualizations that can be adopted by researchers: The “Nordic” perspective (Gronroos 1982, 1984), describing the service quality in common terms as consisting of functional and technical quality and the “American” perspective (Parasuraman, et al., 1985) that uses terms to describe service encounter characteristics as reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles. Following the arguments that SERVQUAL reflects the service delivery process, a study (Kang & James, 2004) empirically examined the European perspective (i.e. Gronroos’ model) suggesting that service quality consists of three dimensions, technical, functional and image, and that image functions as a filter in service quality perception.

Kotler and Keller (2009) defined service as an act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to the physical product. Similarly, Tyagi and Gupta (2008) defined service as the feeling that the customers have about the experience in the consumption process. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) defined service quality as a global judgment, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service. These researchers developed a service quality measurement scale called SERVQUAL. This five-dimensional service quality model is focused on customer perceptions and expectations of quality. This model measures the discrepancies i.e. the gap between the customer’s perceptions and expectations. (Al-Shammari & Kanina, 2014). The indications of the researchers were that if the expectation of service quality is exceeded, it means customers’ satisfaction. If the expectation is not met, it means customers’ dissatisfaction. (Parasuraman et. al., 1985).

Service quality is commonly thought to comprise of five generic dimensions- responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy and reliability. These dimensions form the basis for service measurement tool SERVQUAL (Lowndes and Dawes, 2001). This tool helps organizations to improve their service quality, resulting in greater customer retention (Pawar & Geetha, 2014). In service firms the practitioners are interested to know the customer perceptions of service quality for identifying shortfalls and improving service delivery (Saravan & Rao, 2007). In order to satisfy and retain customers the organization has to offer a superior service quality (Swaid & Wigand, 2007).

An understanding the relationship between service quality, brand experience and customer satisfaction is helpful for managers in their assessment of the level of appeal that will influence target consumers’ perception of brand personality, as well as their brand experience (Keng, Tran & Thi, 2013). The market place has changed over the years; organizations have gone from selling and promoting products and services to selling and enticing customers through experiences (Joy & Sherry, 2003). According to Brakus et

al., (2009) brand experience was conceptualized as “a subjective, internal consumer response (sensation, feeling, cognition) and a behavioral response evoked by brand-related stimuli (e.g., colors, shapes, typefaces, designs, slogans, mascots, brand characters) that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments”.

The Millennial generation consists of 2 billion new customers worldwide, which makes them potential leaders, consumers, and users with great purchasing power that shape the social, economic and political landscape in the future (Qader& Omar, 2015).

Generation Y or the Millennials are lately considered a great concern to marketers’. This age group grew up with the worldwide web, the latest technology, and numerous communication channels, ranging from cell phones to Facebook and Twitter, leaving Generation X and the more elderly far behind (Vân Nguyen, 2010). Millennials have selective nature, they value "experience", and therefore, the Internet alone is not sufficient enough to capture their attention. Informing them what they should like or what to do is an ineffective way to break through to them. This generation wants to experience the world firsthand and pass their own judgment, and they like to do so with their peers. Marketers must become involved with the experiences of the Millennials in order to be taken seriously and respected enough for them to buy the product or service (Williams & Page, 2010).

Regardless of the numerous examples that affirm the positive relationship between customer satisfaction and brand experience, this paper tries to prove that Millennials have the power to change the market and the future of entrepreneurial companies, especially in a developing economy such as Macedonia. In addition, the analysis tests the hypothesis “Positive brand experience of Millennials can lead to positive changes in future service quality of entrepreneurial companies”.

3. Research Methodology

In this particular study, we apply the descriptive and deductive statistical methods in order to present the characteristics of the issue which is the subject of the research as well as to understand the relationship between satisfaction and service quality and the impact on entrepreneurial companies, with a focus on generation Millennials and the automobile industry.

A) Methods of Data Collection and Instrument

For collecting the necessary data primary and secondary sources were used. The primary data was collected with the help of the questionnaire – SERVQUAL. Secondary data was collected from a number of relevant international, national and local sources. The focus of the primary research

was the automobile industry in the Republic of Macedonia, as a developing country. The SERVQUAL instrument was used to measure the discrepancies between customers' expectations and perceptions. It contains 22 items and comprises two parts: expectations and perceptions. This instrument includes the following groups of questions:

- Group 1 - covers the demographic characteristics about the respondents (age, sex, level of education, income etc.)
- Group 2 - is a set of 22 questions asking the customers to rate their expectations of the service quality
- Group 3 - is a set of 22 questions asking the customers to rate their perceptions of the service quality
- Group 4 - is a set of two questions designed to measure customers' loyalty (their willingness to recommend the services to others and their willingness to buy from the same brand).

In the study, five generic dimensions that compromise the service quality were analyzed- responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy and reliability. Tangibles means physical facilities, equipment, and staff appearance. Reliability in service quality is the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; Responsiveness means the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; Assurance is in fact the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; Empathy consists of caring, individual attention the firm provides its customers (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p.23). Five point Likert scale (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") was used as a statistical tool used for analysis, and respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a given statement. Each point of the scale carries a score. The response indicating the least satisfying degree is given the least score and the one that is the most satisfying is given the highest score. Standard deviation indicates how much the values of a certain data set differ from the mean on average. Quantitative (descriptive and deductive) and qualitative (inductive) analysis were used in this paper. Descriptive statistics were also used to describe the population or data set under this research. IBM SPSS21 Statistics for data analysis in this survey research.

B) Sample and sampling procedure

The population study involves all those people using the authorized service of automobile industry in the Republic of Macedonia. Due to the large population of 12,678 in 2016, a random selection was done using the stratified random sampling. The sampling frame is the company's data base, containing

detailed information about each customer who scheduled a service appointment, visited the service center or had his vehicle serviced, at any of the four branches in the country. In total, 1000 questionnaires were distributed randomly, and 986 were valid returned and the response rate is 98.6%.

According to the data sampling method, used to select the respondents, the population of the study was divided into five groups of customers related to five generational groups, Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers and Traditionalists. Special emphasis was given to the biggest generation using the services in the automobile industry – the Millennials.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The descriptive analysis provides a representation of the respondents according to the analyzed demographic characteristics. The generations (a group of individuals born and living about the same time) are defined by the needs and behaviors of individuals within more than one specific generational group. In our study the descriptive statistics shows that 118 (12%) of the respondents belong to Generation Z, 431 (44%) are Millennials, 353 (36%) are Generation X, 68 (7%) belong to the group of Baby boomers and only 3 (1%) are Traditionalists. Different generations in this era of globalization differently adapt to the changing environment and therefore differently invest in current activities bearing in mind their future. According to their income (Tab.1) and their level of education (Tab.2), Millennials are considered as the generation with highest level of education and the best paid for their work.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of generations and their annual income

Generation		Annual Income in Euros										Sum
		0-2400		2401-4000		4001-7850		7851-11999		>12000		
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Generation Z (<21)		20	10	70	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	118
Millennials 22/40		10	9	80	47	80	90	56	40	9	10	431
Generation X 41/52		0	0	40	57	90	30	49	10	27	50	353
Baby boomers 53/71		0	0	0	0	0	0	40	8	16	4	68
Traditionalists>72		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
	Sum	30	19	190	122	170	120	145	58	55	64	973

Of those people who used the automobile service industry and who were surveyed, 39% of Millennial females have Master's degree and 46% have PhD. Millennial males have reported a master's degree with 30% and 51% of them have said that they have completed their PhD. This is in contrast when compared to Gen X females and of Gen X males. An even greater

contrast in comparison to the Baby Boomers of whom only very small percentages of females and of males have high education degrees.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of generations and education

Generation		Education										Sum
		Some high school		High school graduate		Bachlor's degree		Masters's degree		Ph.D		
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Generation Z (<21)		90	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	118
Millennials 22/40		0	0	10	9	120	77	69	90	36	20	431
Generation X 41/52		0	0	20	27	100	70	77	30	9	20	353
Baby boomers 53/71		0	0	8	1	8	1	24	6	16	4	68
Traditionalists>72		0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Sum	90	28	38	37	231	148	170	126	61	44	973

Furthermore, not only are Millennials the most educated, but they are also continuing the trend of Gen X where more women are earning degrees in higher education when compared to the number of men as shown on Table 3. The gender gap in Macedonia is still high but within the millennial generation, women are closing in on men.

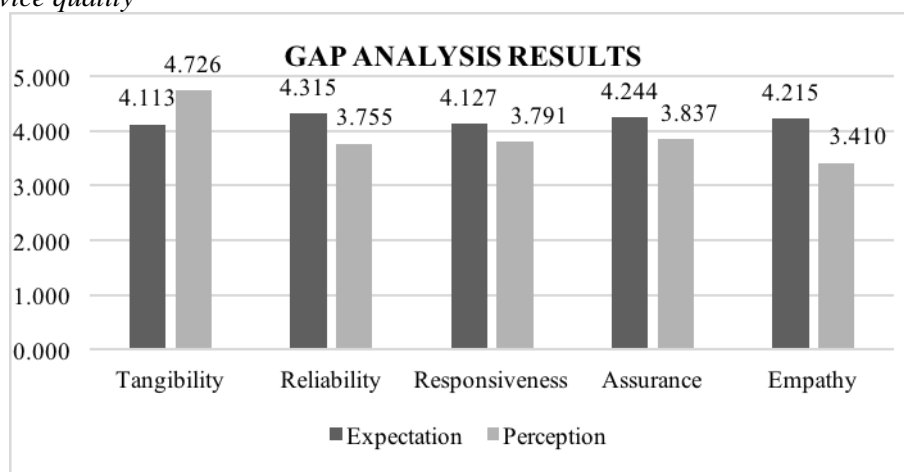
Table 3. Generations

Generation	Male	Female	Sum
Generation Z (<21)	90	28	118
Millennials 22/40	235	196	431
Generation X 41/52	206	147	353
Baby boomers 53/71	56	12	68
Traditionalists >72	3	0	3
Sum	590	383	973

The descriptive statistics also gives some insight into the gap between the analyzed expectations and perceptions of the observed generations. The gap was calculated on the five generic dimensions- responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy and reliability that compromise the service quality. Figure 1 shows the gap between the expected and the perceived service quality by all five generations. Based on these results, we can see that in almost all of the dimensions there is still place for improvement in the process of meeting customers' expectations. That is, the results show that in four of the

dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) the level of expectations are still higher than the level of the perceived service quality, while only in one dimension, tangibility, the perceived service quality is slightly higher than the expectations. Bearing in mind that satisfaction occurs only when expectations are met with same level or higher perceptions of service quality; we can say that in this case some changes are needed in order to improve the level of the perceived service quality.

Figure 1. Gap analysis results – all five generations- expected vs. perceived service quality



Moreover, when Millennials are excluded, the gap analysis results show that the difference between the expectation and perceptions becomes lower, and that the other generations tend to show a higher level of satisfaction with the service quality i.e. their expectations have been met on a higher level. (Fig.2)

Figure 2. Gap analysis results (Millennial excluded)– expected vs. perceived service quality

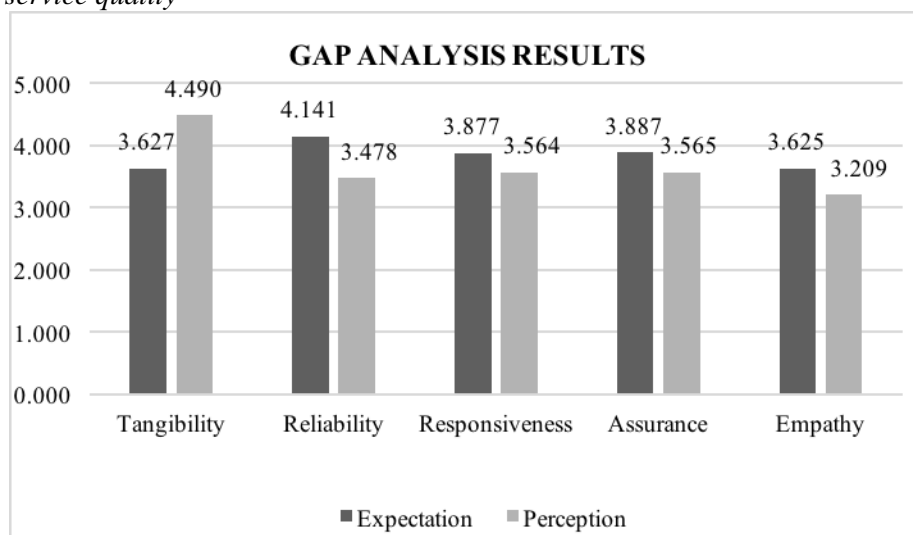
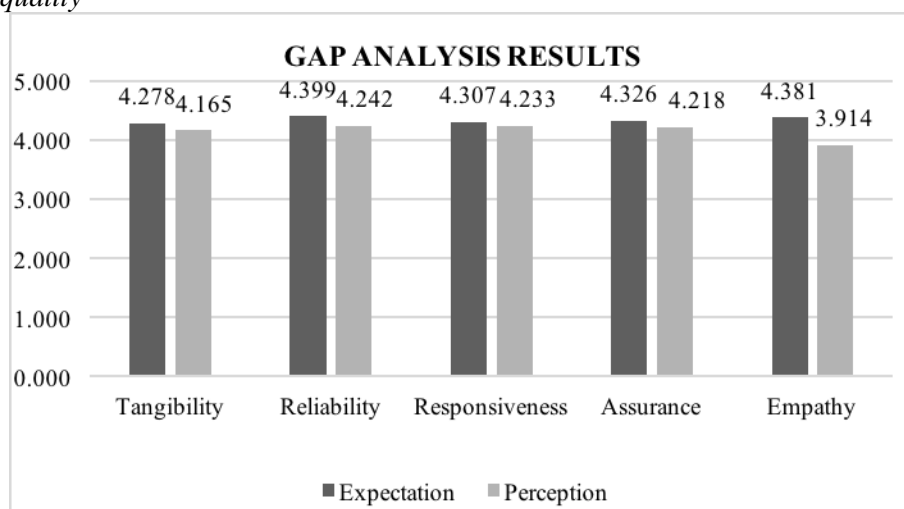


Figure 3 shows the Millennials gap analysis results. Taking into consideration the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model, in four of them (Tangibility, Reliability, Assurance and Empathy) there is a significant gap. Millennials are considered not only rational, but also emotional, and therefore, they are also concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences in life. They are in search of brands that are adapting to their values and aspirations. According to the answers of the questions, we may say that the perfect combination for Millennials would be the combination of environmentalism and technology. The questions included in these four dimensions indicate that the expectations were higher, due to the different mindset of the Millennial, when compared to the other generations. Automobile companies have to work on these issues in order to meet their expectations.

Figure 3. Millennials' gap analysis results – expected vs. perceived service quality



The deductive statistics shows the connection and the dependence of the perceived service quality from the level of met expectations on the base of the abovementioned analyzed five dimensions. The deductive statistics in this case was done on the differences between the perceptions and expectations of the service quality. A Paired (2-tailed) T-Test was performed with the service quality dimensions to see if there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and the actual perceived service quality. When all generations were analyzed, a statistically significant difference was noticed between the expected and the actual service quality on two of the dimensions - the variable Reliability on 1% significance level and on variable Assurance a statistically significant difference on 10% significance scale.

Table 4. Paired T-Test of Expected versus Actual Service Quality (all generations included)

Paired Samples Test								
	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Low	Upper			

				er	r			
Tangibility (Expectation -Perception)	0.38	0.16	0.08	0.12	0.64	4.71	3.00	0.02
Reliability (Expectation -Perception)	0.56	0.16	0.07	0.37	0.75	8.04	4.00	0.00
Responsiveness (Expectation -Perception)	0.34	0.39	0.19	-0.28	0.96	1.72	3.00	0.18
Assurance (Expectation -Perception)	0.41	0.14	0.07	0.19	0.63	5.93	3.00	0.01
Empathy (Expectation -Perception)	0.80	0.19	0.09	0.56	1.04	9.29	4.00	0.00

On the other side, when we analyze only Millennials' answers (Tab. 5), it is important to notice that their expectations were higher than the actual perceived service quality. Almost all variables (except Responsiveness), when using Paired T-Test, showed statistically significant difference. Millennials were not satisfied with Tangibles. They expected more and therefore the difference in answers is statistically significant on 5% significance level. When we talk about the Reliabilities, Millennials are also not satisfied i.e. their answers are statistically significant on 1% significance level. The variable - Empathy is one of the key dimensions that have great impact on Millennials. The answers of the questions in the survey indicate that they expect individual attention; the company should understand their needs and most importantly the company has to operate at hours convenient to the Millennials. This dimension, according to the results was found to be significant at 0.00 i.e. on 1% on the significance level scale.

Table 5. Paired Samples Test –Expected versus Actual Service Quality of Millennials

Paired Samples Test				
	Paired Differences	t	df	Sig.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				(2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Tangibility (Expectation-Perception)	0.11	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.20	4.10	3.00	0.03
Reliability (Expectation-Perception)	0.16	0.05	0.02	0.09	0.22	6.74	4.00	0.00
Responsiveness (Expectation-Perception)	0.09	0.09	0.04	-0.05	0.22	2.09	3.00	0.13
Assurance (Expectation-Perception)	0.11	0.08	0.04	-0.01	0.23	2.85	3.00	0.07
Empathy (Expectation-Perception)	0.47	0.11	0.05	0.33	0.61	9.25	4.00	0.00

Table 6 shows the Level of Customer Loyalty at the automotive company, based on the data collected from the respondents. The mean of the data after the calculation was 3.40 for the first question, which indicates that the respondents agree to recommend the brand to others. Also, the respondents answered positively to the question whether they would again buy from the company.

Table 6 Level of Customer Loyalty at the automotive company

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Would you recommend this company to a friend/family member?	3,40	1,456
How likely are you to buy from this company again?	4,10	,808

Table 7 presents the Level of Customer Loyalty of Millennials at the automotive company. The mean of the data after the calculation was 2.32 for the first question, which means that the Millennials would not recommend the brand to others as easily as the other generations.

Table 7 Level of Customer Loyalty of Millennials at the automotive company

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Would you recommend this company to a friend/family member?	2,32	1,292
How likely are you to buy from this company again?	3,93	,821

However, they would likely buy again from the same company, which gives hope that the company still has the chance to improve the service quality in order to attain a higher degree of loyalty of Millennials as customers to the organization.

Conclusion

Customers expect to receive good quality service, not only when they purchase the vehicles but also when they need any kind of service. The conducted study evaluated the impact of the service quality on customer's satisfaction and customers' loyalty in the automobile industry in Macedonia. SERVQUAL was used to test the service quality. The study indicated that most of the customers (concerning the generations) are highly satisfied and loyal to the company. The results will be definitely beneficial to the automobile company, but in order to stay competitive on the market or to be ahead of their competitors they have to be very careful how to handle the Millennials.

Today's customers, especially the Millennials expect something more. They want to be connected to the brand, they expect impeccable service quality, and they have the internet and social media platforms at their disposal. This means that in order to retain a Millennial, companies have to take into consideration that this generation has a different way of thinking and they are ready to change the game in this kind of business. Therefore, if companies want them as their loyal customers they have to create their own social media platforms. When a Millennial is satisfied, they will post about the impeccable service quality. But companies have to be aware of the Millennials' empathy. None of them would like to hear that the product is not environment-friendly.

Companies have to improve the level of satisfaction, thus improving the loyalty and that in turn will reflect the company's position on the market as well as their profitability.

The automobile companies have to build a strong and long term relationship with their customers, especially with the Millennials. Having in mind the results of this study about the particular and different expectations of Millennials when compared to the other generations, and the fact that Millennials as a generation represent a large number from the population, we may assume that this generation is the one that will most likely influence future changes in entrepreneurial businesses, including the automotive industry that was the subject of interest in this study. Winning the Millennials' confidence and enhancing the positive brand experience are the key factors to a successful company in this modern market. On the other hand, the key to improving the service quality is to manage the customers' expectation gap. Therefore, periodic service quality assessments are necessary to determine the areas that need improvement. Only with proactive approach, can companies strengthen their position in the market. In order to achieve this, it is crucial to be close to customers, continuously to listen to them, be up to date with information about their future needs, expectations and perceptions.

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